

# SATV SMALL AUDIENCE TV

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Les Levine

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## 1/2 INCH PRODUCTION

Now that Beta and VHS formats have a real bite into the home market it seems worthwhile to discuss the possibilities of 1/2 inch video as a production format. Anyone interested in video has heard about the Beta-Cam and Re-Cam formats. While neither of those formats has much bearing on what we're going to discuss here, it seems important to make clear at the outset what the various 1/2 inch formats are.

Essentially, Beta-Cam and Re-Cam are an in-field replacement for 1 inch video. Both are camera and recorder combined in one unit. The recorder uses 1/2 inch videotape, but at an extremely high speed to reduce the picture to noise ratio, and both formats have built-in time-base correctors. The purpose of the TBC is to improve the stability of the picture by correcting the gyroscopic and timing errors one normally gets in 1/2 inch video equipment.

The camera operator uses the Beta-Cam in the field with normal Beta-Max tape. This tape is encoded with color and timing information on the recorder end. On the camera end, it is digitally processed and enhanced. This is a result of the wave of cosmetic video that has been going on for the past six or seven years. Both camera and recorder have highly sophisticated micro-processing computers. After the 1/2 inch tape is brought into the studio, it is bumped up to 1 inch during the editing process.

Don't confuse Beta-Cam and Re-Cam with Sony's home Beta Movie or JVC's C-format which is an industrial grade system. At the moment there is a tendency in all aspects of electronic systems towards miniaturization. While Beta Movie is an interesting idea it has little potential as a video art medium because it only runs at Beta 2 which is too slow a speed to produce good, corrected images.

In my opinion, the best small format equipment on the market today is JVC's HRV compact system. Although it only plays 20 minutes of tape, it produces a much more stable image and is much easier to time base correct because the tape runs at a higher speed. It does not seem an enormous disadvantage to have only 20 minutes of tape per cassette. As a matter of fact, this is the same amount of videotape that you would run through most professional 3/4 inch equipment.

Another aspect which contributes to the improved image of the JVC is the fact that it has a 1/2 inch Saticon tube as opposed to a 2/3 inch. This newly designed smaller tube gives better results than the 2/3 inch tubes

and certainly is much better than the new miniature CCD cameras which have no tubes.

While all of us have been dazzled by the complicated effects that high band video technology has produced in recent years, none of that compares to the enormous leap forward TBC has made possible for the 1/2 inch formats. As a matter of fact, TBCs do a better job of improving low band formats than they do on high band formats. At the broadcast level, TBCs are introduced at the line simply as a typical synchronization device to add in RS-170 before sending the signal into the air so that it will lock up to the home TV screen at a slightly faster speed than it otherwise would.

As cameras used for broadcast are generally high grade three-tube cameras that produce extremely clear images, TBCs often do little to improve the image quality. Most of the time they actually reduce the quality a little bit by causing some banding or snow effects. By nature, high band video looks best when no other signal is mixed with it.

With 1/2 inch low band the TBC can drastically improve the image for the simple reason that the image produced is technically sloppy to begin with. Whatever minor visual noise might be picked up by putting it through a TBC is a small trade off when you consider the enormous improvements in color quality, picture stability, contrast reduction and sharpness one gets.

To use 1/2 inch for the best results, get a recorder that runs at a reasonably high speed so as to reduce the signal to noise ratio, bump up the original tapes from 1/2 inch to 3/4 inch through a TBC, and edit the bumped up 3/4 inch on normal 3/4 inch editors. There are 1/2 inch editors on the market, but you would then have to TBC the distribution copies. It is best to introduce TBC at the earliest possible moment of production. This way your errors are cleaned up before post-production.

As a TBC gives you a 'real' sync signal which is more typical than the standard AC pulse line sync you get from most VCRs, the earlier you introduce it the easier it will be for your videotape to lock up to any post-production system you may wish to work with; systems like ADO and Quantel all require TBC, as well as time code, to work. If one is intending to use any of these digital post-production systems, it is necessary that the original 1/2 inch tape be time base corrected and time coded in the initial bump up to 3/4 inch. Time code has no effect on the appearance of the videotape. It is simply a counting device. It makes it possible for the post-production computers to find your edits exactly where you want them.

## SPIFFS

It seems obvious to me that 1/2 inch is becoming the main video art production format of the future. There are several reasons, the most obvious of which is simply portability. The second, of course, is cost.

One of the most unpleasant aspects of being a video artist is having to deal with video salesmen. Most TV salesmen operate on a very small commission and depend on what are called 'spiffs' to earn their living. A 'spiff' is a kickback given directly by the manufacturer to the salesman. By selling one manufacturer's equipment over another, the salesman can considerably improve his income. It is a well known fact in the trade that JVC and Panasonic give much larger 'spiffs' than Sony does. Therefore, in most instances, salespeople are going to be telling you that these products work better.

As a rule, it is true that Sony is way out in front in tape recorders, and JVC beats Sony in cameras. As far as the new miniature CCD cameras are concerned, none of them at present are suitable for production. At this point, they're strictly for home movies.

## SPECIAL EFFECTS

At present, video can be divided into two categories, the first being production that is technically complicated, uses high quality cameras, on-line editing and digital effects. The second is the more personal, individual, less technically oriented video art.

While some artists have an interest in super high technology for their productions and have used it well, in general this is a mistake for several reasons. First, no artist could out high-tech the industrial producers. Second, the extreme high cost of high tech would mean that video art would have to continue to be a welfare art at a time when government has less interest in spending money on the arts. Another reason is that all these high tech effects drastically age a production. When these effects come out, they are overused by everyone and within a very short time because of viewer boredom they are replaced with newer effects.

A tape that has no special effects has a more timeless quality. I'm not against using special effects where they improve and enhance a production, but generally they have been used in a mindless way to simply give videotapes a corporate, plastic appearance. Special effects are responsible for creating considerable confusion about what video art is anyway. Some of the early artists used colorization, synthesization, and special effects in such trivial ways so as to give the impression that video artists were not only incapable of thinking, but that they simply did not have the apparatus to do so.

## CONTENT AS PROBLEM

It seems reasonable to believe that one of the functions of art is to make people think and feel and experience. But it's hard for the viewer to take anything seriously when confronted by process rather than thought. One of video art's main problems has been its

inability to attract intelligent protagonists. For the most part, the better known video artists have relied on effect making, a discouraging fact in an age of super communication.

The public has constantly said of early video art, "Why isn't this as good as TV?" The reason then was because those producing it wanted to make it look like previous art forms and were incapable of understanding the nature of real information as art. Now that some video art is better than TV, the question of whether it has to be on TV or not is no longer an issue. A video artist working in a TV station would by the nature of the system have to become a writer of television.

One has to see TV as a mass communication device whose primary function is to sell consumption, not only consumption of objects such as shaving creams and deodorants, but also consumption of ideas such as fear and paranoia. In the truest sense, everything on TV is devised to be for sale. Nothing on TV adheres to previous patterns of logic that existed in the structure of written language. All motivations become completely confused and inverted. TV news is just one long commercial insisting that you buy the psychological conditions that it projects. Commercials are the real news of the day. They tell you what you want to look like and how to act. So called non-commercial TV or public television is simply one long on-going commercial for class and taste prejudice.

McLuhan may have been right when he said, "The medium is the message." However clever a quip that may seem in retrospect, we poor viewers are left with the "content as the problem." TV has effectively changed America's view of itself by introducing content which serves as a model for that changed condition.

## SPECIALIZATION

Whether you watch programs or commercials, any reasonable person would come up with the impression that Americans are murderers, thieves, dope addicts, hijackers, emotional idiots, ego maniacs, sex fiends, over-eaters, adulterers, liars, and war mongers who only respond when their real passions have been pushed to the most extreme point. Most programming on mass media TV does not create a positive view of society. Those in mass media always say that they're simply recording the news or showing the people what they want to see. Both of these positions are erroneous. We all know that the news is selected to create sensation. The enormous growth of cable TV and video cassettes proves that TV is not giving viewers what they want.

New technology always creates new ideas, and the cable and home video cassette open the possibility for a form of TV that is clearly not mass media. Cable and video cassettes make it possible to produce programming for smaller audiences. It is no longer necessary for people to insist that video art become TV, for the economics of 1/2 inch video and cable allow for small audience video art production.

There can be no question that small audience TV is the wave of the future. Increased sales of home VCRs in the past few years make it clear that people are in-

terested in watching programming that is more suited to their individual interest and taste. In the same way that book publishers have found specialization rather than popularization the key to success, small audience TV is obviously the most exciting development the medium has seen so far.

If an audience of 100,000 can be found for a cable program that program can be successful. If an individual artist can sell 1,000 video cassettes at \$50 apiece, an economic basis for the production exists. It isn't necessary for the video artist to broadcast to everyone in America. It's only necessary for him or her to be able to reach that limited group which is interested in art. They don't have to reach everyone interested in art, only those interested in video art or film. As small as that audience seems, it is still large enough to support the production and sale of 90% of video art productions.

Most people interested in video art have home VCRs. If they're going to pay \$50 for a Hollywood movie which they will most likely watch only once or twice, they will probably pay \$50 for a video art cassette which they will watch several times over the years. By nature of the unusual content and limited quantity, these video art cassettes are also bound to become collector's items. The outlets for these kinds of sales are already in place. Within five years, most videotape stores will have video art sections in them.

## GOVERNMENT SERVICE

All of this means that there is going to be a further parting of the ways between mass media and SATV. In order to compete in SATV and keep production costs down, most of it will have to be produced on 1/2 inch video. This will probably drastically improve the overall quality of video art.

Since its inception, video art has been for the most part a welfare art. That is to say, it has been completely government sponsored, and considerably underfunded at that. That also means it's being subtly government controlled. The government has given the most money to the least problematical art. Once in a while it has supported a documentary or two on social issues but, in general, it has given money to those who use the medium in the most decorative way.

The government sees art as a government service. They use it the same way they use the EPA. They support the kind of art that will cover over and re-decorate the mess they themselves make of society. It's as though for them art were a red herring. If you're looking at something pretty your mind is going to be off the real issue. Those who have produced the most mindless effects have gotten enormous support while the most thoughtful producers get almost no support at all.

Most of the money the NEA hands out is given to large symphonies and ballet companies whose boards of directors are extremely wealthy, and so the grants amount to little more than payoffs from politicians to their wealthy friends for favors unknown. In the truest sense, most of the money given these large cultural organizations merely saves their wealthy patrons from having to put up their own money. In that sense, a large

portion of support for the arts has been simply welfare for the rich.

Three percent or less of the approximate \$187,000,000 for the arts programs in the U.S. ends up in the hands of artists. Therefore, artists are once again being exploited as red herrings to siphon off government money to the wealthy. Most of the so-called alternative spaces that show video end up paying practically nothing to the producers of this video. For the most part, the grants these organizations get are used to pay the salaries for one or two individuals, such as their president or director. Many of these alternative spaces simply see these artists as a necessary evil.

Possibly what will happen with 1/2 inch video is it will permit money other than government money to flow into the system. There is the potential for profit; after all, if you sell 2,000 cassettes you gross \$100,000. Video art will probably attract the private sector much the way painting and sculpture does at the moment. If it's possible to gross \$100,000 by selling 2,000 video cassettes, then it will probably be possible to get an individual investor to put up \$5,000 to make the program.

## ANYWHERE YOU GO

Half-inch video is going to bring a lot of new young people into the medium because they will be able to afford it. Most of these people will have little knowledge of previous video art. Many of them will be savvy to computer use and my guess is most will enter because they have the desire to communicate. Video art in the next generation is bound to become video communication. This generation is being taught how to think and is being given the tools to get responses to their thinking in an almost simultaneous way.

Information is obviously the issue. Communication is obviously the desire. Half-inch video makes it possible for everyone to tell everyone else about the nature of their own lives. Half-inch video, because of its smallness and portability, will make it possible to record things that were unthinkable before. The advantage of half-inch video is that it can become the new electronic instamatic camera. It goes anywhere you go. It fits into the carryalls that most people take with them these days. It is a way of seeing the world as your world.

As the equipment becomes small and portable it more clearly defines one's body sensation relationship to one's environment. It permits the possibility of a personal sense of poetry. One can record the experience one is having without the necessity of writing one's thoughts and formulating the experience through the process of language and logic. Half-inch video permits seeing as a pure extension of feeling. The possibilities for producing art are expanded to meet the possibility of self-expression. Half-inch video now goes anywhere you go. It shoots anything you can see, think or feel about. It becomes as common as the Polaroid camera.

The best thing about 1/2 inch video is that it's going to let everybody do it while at the same time it's going to exaggerate everybody's confusion about what they should do. This exaggerated confusion is not a bad thing. It is just a beginning. We all have to find out who



we are and what we've got to say at least once in our lives.

## GROUP SHOWS EXPLOIT THE GROUP

What seems clear now is that the group show is a new form of cultural strategy. Group shows exploit the group at large and the individuals who make them up. In a group show art has no value as art. It only serves to posture the ambitions of the curator in the media, similar to the way prosecutors take on people like DeLorean as a means of bringing media attention to themselves, while at the same time permitting those who are drug trafficking all the time to go scot free.

The group show is an ideal ploy for government funding. Government can get more visibility through group shows than they can by supporting individual excellence in the arts. Group shows represent the single most abusive practice that government and art have devised as a means of bringing attention to themselves. If the artist asks for any special treatment to maintain his or her individual work they are cast in the role of an outsider, a person unreasonable and difficult. Most of the money given for such group shows ends up in the hands of the presenters anyway. There is very little value in most of these group shows. They end up generally as hodgepodes of one sort or another. Two weeks after they're over, the viewer cannot remember what was in them. They cast art as a generic rather than a specific.

Presenters cast themselves in the role of culture hero to the government. "If we didn't show this work which you have already put your money into there would be no place for people to see it." The presenters' approach is that they are doing an heroic act by showing unsaleable art, but the fact is video artists and government pay for these heroics.

## WELFARE ART CENTERS

Those who are supported by the government are the government. At very least, they are government artists. Their positions are sufficiently whimsical and toned down so as not to give the government too much cause for pause.

Art sells. At this point, many large corporations want to use it as a marketing tool. They make no bones about it. The alternative spaces, which use it to sell themselves to government so that their budgets can be increased, often compete with the artist for press attention and government funding. What seems clear now is that these alternative spaces have become quasi-government agencies acting to stem the flow of public displeasure with government support for artmakers.

At no other level can the government get as much visibility as easily for doing so little to help the production of art. It is more correct to call these alternative spaces 'welfare art centers,' as they have become so dependent on government by taking government money in exchange for acting as public agents. These welfare art

centers victimize their artist-recipients in the exact same way that ordinary recipients of welfare are victimized by welfare agencies. They do this by turning the experience of being an artist into a highly institutional, bureaucratic obstacle course.

Making art should never be institutionalized, apart from the fact that it may be beneficial for artists to cooperate or collaborate in certain instances. The benefit society loses by destroying the individuality of artistic pursuits and replacing them with bureaucratic nonsense is beyond comprehension. A society that implies that art is not produced by sensitive individuals, who are capable of applying themselves to experiencing life in some more hypersensitive way, is a society that is doomed to plastic mediocrity.

## ART VIDEO

Throughout history, all great art has been created by people of great sensitivity and unusual vision and talent. These are not the kind of things that government is capable of understanding nor wants to understand. If one denies that individuality, personal thinking and extraordinary vision are the basis of good art, then we would have to believe that the television networks as we know them are producing perfect video art. It sounds so ridiculous that nobody would believe it. But it brings up the important point which is "what is video art anyway?"

The answers to that question are deeply personal. Many of the so-called high tech, high band productions that are common today are little more than unusual television programs. One doubts that unusual television programs are video art no matter how interesting they are. An explanation of how the technology works as a visual process will not sustain itself as video art either.

Television does not seem to be the best medium for formal explanations, so work that tries to deal with its formalities won't satisfy. Structuralism, while interesting at its beginning, falls apart as its structure is understood. Structuralism exaggerates the viewer's most common complaint: television's all the same. There's no content in it.

So "what is video art?" The answer is art produced by means of video. Instead of calling it video art, it should be called Art Video. It must be art first, then video. The same rules that apply to any work of art apply to Art Video: the need for an artist to understand the nature of a particular societal anxiety at a given moment, to reduce that anxiety to artifice, and to present the artifice in such a way that everyone understands a little more of their own experience.

## DO IT

Any form of experience an artist is capable of expressing can be in the medium of video as easily as in paint or clay. The artist connects with a purely personal and poetic vision of his or her mental and visual experience and transmutes these connections into visions which authenticate clearly in the mind of the viewer.

## DALE HOYT

our own mind's eye, but because yet another aspect of our lives has been co-opted by a guild of disinterested storyboarders, directors, make-up artists, and choreographers. We are supplied with one more reason to stay home, one more justification for our agoraphobia. I'm not implying that we will literally not go outside as much, I just mean that we have lost one more reason to stray from the great cosmic Holiday Inn of our pop consciousness. So we atrophy with only the slightest tinge of regret. We can go anywhere our hearts desire, but why bother? It all looks alike, and we know where everything is. The option of staying put seems infinitely more practical.

Just as the parishioners of religious broadcasts are asked to believe that what they watch is a direct feed from the Almighty, MTV pretends to plant us in the thick of things, the hip, the now. The only true brotherhood we are members of though is our inclusion in a common ratings figure. This masquerade is, nonetheless, as irresistible as it is addicting.

The "ritual, corporate participation" at work during a broadcast of a moon landing, royal wedding, assassination or the like, alleges a profound and ecstatic mutual reality. To the networks, these moments of euphoria are only an occasional dividend, but to MTV they are the station's entire commission, vocation and sustenance. But by its nature and composition this phantasmagoric bliss can be neither long lived nor harmless. Our pain can be soothed, postponed, even eliminated, but its absence can devour us just as ferociously.

It must never be forgotten that any artificial dependency is a no win situation, no matter how serene or adjusted the junkie might seem. The inherent deception forever threatens to topple the house of cards of the addicted. The opiate is the orphanage. It houses us, it is not our home. The hollowness I feel while not watching television (MTV et al), or when it is not a practical option, is distinct and gnawing. What should be where this hollowness loiters, I may never exactly know. I only know I can't go home because I never had one to begin with. Neither

do you. We only have dormitories, hotel rooms, and sublets. We leave no forwarding address.

## Conclusion

While Mander chose militant idealism to consummate his essay, demanding the unconditional extermination of the entire medium, I'll opt for subdued optimism. MTV and the like could only be eliminated if something on the scale of the collapse of the international banking system were to occur. Otherwise, as sure as the moving finger shuffles through profit receipts, MTV will not be budged.

As even a snob such as myself has frequent occasion to do, watching MTV does not have to make us bad or stupid. Taken lightly, we can at least postpone our fall into the thrasher and come to realistic terms with our diminishing constitutions. Fight the good fight, some might call it. "If you can't lick 'em. . ." also comes to mind.

Steina Vasaulka demurely suggests that "if we are all to be victims, let's be informed rather than merely innocent ones." Mander might repudiate this as insubstantial, but it remains perhaps the only ration of dignity we can hoard. Even such a scant recourse against MTV and the culture it generates should be treasured as precious and our single consolation.

It will still happen, though, and we'll let it. The tentacles will wrap, tug and constrict ever so slowly, irreversibly. We are not scheduled to be annihilated. Rather we will be lulled, tranquilized, suffocated. Forget the BIG BANG, get ready for the BIG SLEEP. Somewhere out there, there's a Valium with your name on it. □

**(Editor's note:** Dale Hoyt's philippic against MTV is obviously aimed at the artillery rounds (video clips), as well as the cannon (MTV). "Four Arguments" takes on new and relevant impact with the announcement of not only Ted Turner's Music Video Network, an additional twenty-four hour service, but also the Discovery Music Channel and a second MTV service geared for a 25 to 49 year old demographic group. The imminent glut of music video programming seems the incarnation of Hoyt's gravest nightmare.)

## LES LEVINE

The problem is no different than it has been since the period of cave painting. Artists give visual permission to experience. Artists say, in effect, "Look at this. Feel it and experience it. Go ahead. Do it. You are relieved of all negative reasons for not doing it. All taboos be they real or imagined are eliminated. You may think this way." So what we expect of art, how we think art functions in society, is true for Art Video as well as any other art form.

The individual artist can more easily answer this search with simple tools, such as 1/2 inch video, than by high band mega technology, which are the tools of government and big business. Again, if video is to survive it has to become more personal, more poetic, more involved with the reasoning of individual artistic potency. There will be important work done on 1/2 inch video simply because more artists can work with it on a hands-

on basis. A poet does not need a main frame word processor to give us a poem of lasting beauty.

Half-inch video removes all excuses from the situation. Anybody who has a mind to can afford the medium. It precludes the necessity of government 'support-interference.' Half-inch video responds more directly to the spontaneous metapsychology and the physiological kinetics of the human body. Simply put, it is easy to work with and quick to think with. Its only drawback is that it cannot compete with network television for technical appearance. This should be of little importance to anybody who has a desire to express themselves in video.

If there is such a thing as a utopian art, it will probably be the idea of everyone being able to communicate their expressions and ideas to everyone else in this world. Although 1/2 inch video has not reached that ideal yet, it's the closest we've come so far. □